



Jack Goodman

Vernal bank's claim to fame: Postal rules were changed after bricks were sent through mail.

## Parcel Post Helped Build a Bank in Vernal

An unusual object appeared in my mail drawer at *The Salt Lake Tribune* this past Monday — a brick.

The brick, a commonplace but hefty red one, was crudely tied with heavy twine and bore a note. Being a columnist given to both errors and unwarranted fear, I gave some thought to recent mistakes, including stating that the garage entry to the new Social Hall Plaza building would be on 200 South, when I knew it will be on 200 East.

Then there was the case of my friend Hal Lamb. In a column concerning the summer house built by the "Silver Queen" in Holladay, I mentioned Hal's brother, calling him Bill, although I know his name was Joe Lamb, and even knew Joe had invented an ingenious motorized swimming-pool cover.

But should such innocent errors result in receipt of a heavy red brick? At least a brick is not explosive.

Well, the brief note explained all. There was an anniversary. Indeed, at 1 p.m. on June 16, there was to be a ribbon-cutting in celebration of the restoration of the Bank of Vernal to its original appearance. Unfortunately, the five-pound red brick invitation came too late. . . the celebration that included a Dutch oven cookoff, free burgers and drinks had already occurred. Thus I could not win a mountain bike, color TV set or VCR. Shucks.

### CITYVIEW



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However, I can and will forthwith explain why the Bank of Vernal and its restoration is of more than passing importance to history-minded Utahns, so much so that invitations to this sumptuous feast went to quite a few citizens from officials of Zions Bank, the institution that is now the proud owner of the Parcel Post Bank.

Lest all of the above is a mystery to you, and you don't remember that Ripley's "Believe it or Not" gave the Bank of Vernal its odd nickname — here are the facts. You see, Vernal, supreme city of the Uintah Basin, has no railroad. Vernal never had a rail-

road, but had prospered somewhat nevertheless by 1916. So flush was Vernal, what with cow-punchers crowding its bars and ranch wives crowding its shops, so darn prosperous was the community that, in 1916, the Bank of Vernal's officials decided to build a new and sumptuous bank building, complete with the latest in vaults, tellers' cages and safes. To foil such miscreants as the Wild Bunch, who prospered nearby, said safes were to be encased in a brick building. Brick. Modern. Fireproof. Solid.

Problem was (I repeat) Vernal was not on a railroad. Architect's plans for the new structure called for 80,000 textured bricks, bricks that would cost just seven cents apiece. But freight charges for hauling 80,000 five-pound noggin-crackers would cost four times the cost of the bricks. After all, Vernal was (and is) 175 miles from Salt Lake City, and in 1916 the roads linking the two giant centers of population were not paved. What to do?

"Mail those bricks," some unknown sage suggested. Vernal was in the Second Postal Zone. A 50-pound package could be shipped via parcel post from Utah's capital city to the Uintah Basin's capital for just 52 cents, or less than half the going freight charge. Officials of the Bank of Vernal smiled (or grinned) and ordered 40 tons of bricks neatly and individually wrapped and put into 50-pound bundles, that being the maximum allowed per shipment by Uncle Sam's postal authorities.

And so, rather than moving 175 miles by poor Utah roads to Ver-

nal, the parcels were shipped on Denver and Rio Grande mail cars 407 miles from Salt Lake to another thriving community, namely Mack, Colo. There, the narrow-gauge Uintah Railroad met the mighty Rio Grande. The locomotives of the Uintah hauled the bricks to rail's end at Watson, Utah. There they were loaded into wagons, to be hauled by horse teams to Vernal, a trek that included a ferry crossing of the Green River.

The journey required four days each way for the wagons, and so a mountain of brick soon piled up at Mack. Mack's postmaster wired Washington for succor, and a regulation went into effect limiting the weight of any parcel post shipment to 200 pounds a day. Too late — by the time the regulation was put in place, the final shipment of bricks was en route to Vernal, the bank gained the name "Parcel Post Bank," and soon gained a place in the "Believe it or Not" annuals. Today the building (seen in a drawing copied from an early photo) is owned by Zions Bank, has been restored, and still stands sturdily at 3 West Main in Vernal.

Now — are you ready for some rapid arithmetic? A common brick weighs five pounds. By today's postal rates it costs 56 cents to send a single brick to Vernal from Salt Lake. There were 80,000 bricks mailed. Today the cost of mailing those bricks to Vernal would be, by my calculations, \$44,800. Who says there has been no inflation?

A few further facts: Freight in 1916 cost \$2.50 per hundred pounds, parcel post the aforesaid \$1.50. Thrifty Vernal farmers and ranchers became parcel-post conscious and ordered tools, wagon parts and canned goods by mail. Some even sent crops to market — one corn shipment needed 10 four-ton trucks!

*Jack Goodman has been associated with The Salt Lake Tribune as a staff or free-lance writer for more than 45 years.*